

## M/C Journal, Vol. 11, No. 5 (2008) - 'country'

### *Jindabyne's* Haunted Alpine Country: Producing (an) Australian Badland

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"People live here, they die here so they must leave traces." (Read 140)

"Whatever colonialism was and is, it has made this place unsettling and unsettled." (Gibson, *Badland* 2)

## Introduction

What does it mean for [a] country to be haunted? In much theoretical work in film and Cultural Studies since the 1990s, the Australian continent, more often than not, bears traces of long suppressed traumas which inevitably resurface to haunt the present (Gelder and Jacobs; Gibson; Read; Collins and Davis). Felicity Collins and Therese Davis illuminate the ways Australian cinema acts as a public sphere, or "vernacular modernity," for rethinking settler/indigenous relations. Their term "backtracking" serves as a mode of "collective mourning" in numerous films of the last decade which render unspoken colonial violence meaningful in contemporary Australia, and account for the "aftershocks" of the *Mabo* decision that overturned the founding fiction of *terra nullius* (7). Ray Lawrence's 2006 film *Jindabyne* is another after-*Mabo* film in this sense; its focus on conflict within settler/indigenous relations in a small local town in the alpine region explores a traumatised ecology and drowned country. More than this, in our paper's investigation of country and its attendant politics, *Jindabyne* country is the space of excessive haunting and resurfacing - engaging in the hard work of what Gibson (*Transformations*) has termed "historical backfill", imaginative speculations "that make manifest an urge to account for the disconnected fragments" of country.

Based on an adaptation by Beatrix Christian of the Raymond Carver story, *So Much Water, So Close to Home*, *Jindabyne* centres on the ethical dilemma produced when a group of fishermen find the floating, murdered body of a beautiful indigenous woman on a weekend trip, but decide to stay on and continue fishing. In *Jindabyne*, "'country' [...] is made to do much discursive work" (Gorman-Murray). In this paper, we use the word as a metonym for the nation, where macro-political issues are played out and fought over. But we also use 'country' to signal the 'wilderness' alpine areas that appear in *Jindabyne*, where country is "a notion encompassing nature and human obligation that white Australia has learned slowly from indigenous Australia" (Gibson, *Badland* 178). This meaning enables a slippage between 'land' and 'country'.

Our discussion of country draws heavily on concepts from Ross Gibson's theorisation of badlands. Gibson claims that originally, 'badland' was a term used by Europeans in North America when they came across "a tract of country that would not succumb to colonial ambition" (*Badland* 14). Using Collins and Davis's "vernacular modernity" as a starting point, a film such as *Jindabyne* invites us to work through the productive possibilities of postcolonial haunting; to move from *backtracking* (going over old ground) to imaginative

*backfill* (where holes and gaps in the ground are refilled in unconventional and creative returns to the past). Jindabyne (as place *and* filmic space) signifies "the special place that the Australian Alps occupy for so many Australians", and the film engages in the discursive work of promoting "shared understanding" and the possibility of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal being "in country" (Baird, Egloff and Lebehan 35).

We argue specifically that *Jindabyne* is a product of "aftermath culture" (Gibson *Transformations*); a culture living within the ongoing effects of the past, where various levels of filmic haunting make manifest multiple levels of habitation, in turn the product of numerous historical and physical aftermaths. Colonial history, environmental change, expanding wire towers and overflowing dams all lend meaning in the film to personal dilemmas, communal conflict and horrific recent crimes. The discovery of a murdered indigenous woman in water high in the mountains lays bare the fragility of a relocated community founded in the drowning of the town of old Jindabyne which created Lake Jindabyne. Beatrix Christian (in Trbic 61), the film's writer, explains "everybody in the story is haunted by something. [...] There is this group of haunted people, and then you have the serial killer who emerges in his season to create havoc." "What's in this compulsion to know the negative space?" asks Gibson (*Badland* 14). It's the desire to better know and more deeply understand where we live. And haunting gives us cause to investigate further.

## Drowned, Murderous Country

*Jindabyne* rewrites "the iconic wilderness of Australia's High Country" (McHugh online) and replaces it with "a vast, historical crime scene" (Gibson, *Badland* 2). Along with nearby Adaminaby, the township of Old Jindabyne was drowned and its inhabitants relocated to the new town in the 1960s as part of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme. When *Jindabyne* was made in 2006 the scheme no longer represented an uncontested example of Western technological progress 'taming' the vast mountainous country. Early on in the film a teacher shows a short documentary about the town's history in which Old Jindabyne locals lament the houses that will soon be sacrificed to the Snowy River's torrents. These sentiments sit in opposition to Manning Clark's grand vision of the scheme as "an inspiration to all who dream dreams about Australia" (McHugh online). With a 100,000-strong workforce, mostly migrated from war-ravaged Europe, the post-war Snowy project took 25 years and was completed in 1974. Such was this engineering feat that 121 workmen "died for the dream, of turning the rivers back through the mountains, to irrigate the dry inland" (McHugh online). *Jindabyne* re-presents this romantic narrative of progress as nothing less than an environmental crime. The high-tension wires scar the 'pristine' high country and the lake haunts every aspect of the characters' interactions, hinting at the high country's intractability that will "not succumb to colonial ambition" (Gibson, *Badland* 14).

Describing his critical excavation of places haunted, out-of-balance or simply badlands, Gibson explains:

Rummaging in Australia's aftermath cultures, I try to re-dress the disintegration in our story-systems, in our traditional knowledge caches, our landscapes and ecologies [...] recuperate scenes and collections [...] torn by landgrabbing, let's say, or by accidents, or exploitation that ignores rituals of

preservation and restoration (*Transformations*).

Tourism is now the predominant focus of Lake Jindabyne and the surrounding areas but in the film, as in history, the area does not “succumb to the temptations of pictorialism” (McFarlane 10), that is, it cannot be framed solely by the picture postcard qualities that resort towns often engender and promote. *Jindabyne*’s sense of menace signals the transformation of the landscape that has taken place – from ‘untouched’ to country town, and from drowned old town to the relocated, damned and electrified new one. Soon after the opening of the film, a moment of fishing offers a reminder that a town once existed beneath the waters of the eerily still Lake Jindabyne. Hooking a rusty old alarm clock out of the lake, Stuart explains to Tom, his suitably puzzled young son:

underneath the water is the town where all the old men sit in rocking chairs and there’s houses and shops. [...] There was a night [...] I heard this noise – boing, boing, boing. And it was a bell coming from under the water. ‘Cause the old church is still down there and sometimes when the water’s really low, you can see the tip of the spire.

*Jindabyne*’s lake thus functions as “a revelation of horrors past” (Gibson *Badland* 2). It’s not the first time this man-made lake is filmically positioned as a place where “violence begins to seem natural” (Gibson, *Badland* 13). Cate Shortland’s *Somersault* (2004) also uses Lake Jindabyne and its surrounds to create a bleak and menacing ambience that heightens young Heidi’s sense of alienation (Simpson, ‘Reconfiguring rusticity’). In *Somersault*, the male-dominated Jindabyne is far from welcoming for the emotionally vulnerable out-of-towner, who is threatened by her friend’s father beside the Lake, then menaced again by boys she meets at a local pub. These scenes undermine the alpine region’s touristic image, inundated in the summer with tourists coming to fish and water ski, and likewise, with snow skiers in the winter.

Even away from the Lake, there is no fleeing its spectre. “The high-tension wires marching down the hillside from the hydro-station” hum to such an extent that in one scene, “reminiscent of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975)”, a member of the fishing party is spooked (Ryan 52). This violence wrought upon the landscape contextualises the murder of the young indigenous woman, Susan, by Greg, an electrician who after murdering Susan, seems to hover in the background of several scenes of the film. Close to the opening of *Jindabyne*, through binoculars from his rocky ridge, Greg spots Susan’s lone car coursing along the plain; he chases her in his vehicle, and forces her to stop. Before (we are lead to assume) he drags her from the vehicle and murders her, he rants madly through her window, “It all comes down from the power station, the electricity!” That the murder/ murderer is connected with the hydro-electric project is emphasised by the location scout in the film’s pre-production:

We had one location in the scene where Greg dumps the body in some water and Ray [Lawrence] had his heart set on filming that next to some huge pipelines on a dam near Talbingo but Snowy Hydro didn’t [...] like that negative content [...] in association with their facility and [...] said ‘no’ they wouldn’t let us do it.” (*Jindabyne* DVD extras)

"Tales of murder and itinerancy in wild country are as old as the story of Cain in the killing fields of Eden" (*Badlands* 14). In *Jindabyne* we never really get to meet Greg but he is a familiar figure in Australian film and culture. Like many before him, he is the lone Road Warrior, a ubiquitous white male presence roaming the de-populated country where the road constantly produces acts of (accidental and intentional) violence (Simpson, 'Antipodean Automobility'). And after a litany of murders in recent films such as *Wolf Creek* (Greg McLean, 2005) and *Gone* (Ringan Ledwidge, 2007) the "violence begins to seem natural" (Gibson *Transformations* 13) in the isolating landscape. The murderer in *Jindabyne*, unlike those who have migrated here as adults (the Irish Stuart and his American wife, Claire), is autochthonous in a landscape familiar with a trauma that cannot remain hidden or submerged.

## Contested High Country

The unsinkability of Susan's body, now an 'indigenous murdered body', holds further metaphorical value for *resurfacing* as a necessary component of aftermath culture. Such movement is not always intelligible within non-indigenous relations to country, though the men's initial response to the body frames its drifting in terms of ascension: they question whether they have "broken her journey by tying her up". The film reconfigures *terra nullius* as the ultimate badland, one that can never truly suppress continuing forms of physical, spiritual, historical and cultural engagement with country, and the alpine areas of Jindabyne and the Snowy River in particular. Lennon (14) points to "the legacy of biased recording and analysis" that "constitutes a threat to the cultural significance of Aboriginal heritage in alpine areas" (15). This significance is central to the film, prompting Lawrence to state that "mountains in any country have a spiritual quality about them [...] in Aboriginal culture the highest point in the landscape is the most significant and this is the highest point of our country" (in Corday 40). So whilst the Jindabyne area is contested country, it is the surfacing, upward mobility and unsinkable quality of Aboriginal memory that Brewster argues "is unsettling the past in post-invasion Australia" (in Lambert, *Balayi* 7).

As the agent of backfill, the indigenous body (Susan) unsettles Jindabyne country by offering both evidence of immediate violence and reigniting the memory of it, before the film can find even the smallest possibility of its characters being 'in country'. Claire illustrates her understanding of this in a conversation with her young son, as she attempts to contact the dead girls' family. "When a bad thing happens," she says, "we all have to do a good thing, no matter how small, alright? Otherwise the bad things, they just pile up and up and up." Her persistent yet clumsy enactment of the cross-cultural go-between illuminates the ways "the small town community move through the terms of recent debate: shame and denial, repressed grief and paternalism" (Ryan 53). It is the movement of backfill within the aftermath:

The movement of a foreign non-Aboriginal woman into Aboriginal space intertextually re-animates the processes of 'settlement', resolution and environmental assimilation for its still 'unsettled' white protagonists. [...] Claire attempts an apology to the woman's family and the Aboriginal community – in an Australia before Kevin Rudd where official apologies for the travesties of Australian/colonial history had not been forthcoming [...] her

movement towards reconciliation here is reflective of the 'moral failure' of a disconnection from Aboriginal history. (Lambert, *Diasporas*)

The shift from dead white girl in Carver's story to young Aboriginal woman speaks of a political focus on the 'significance' of the alpine region at a given moment in time. The corpse functions "as the trigger for crisis and panic in an Australia after native title, the stolen generation and the war-on-terror" (Lambert, *Diasporas*). The process of reconnecting with country and history must confront its ghosts if the community is to move forward. Gibson (*Transformations*) argues that "if we continue to close our imaginations to the aberrations and insufficiencies in our historical records. [...] It's likely we won't dwell in the joy till we get real about the darkness." In the post-colonial, multicultural but still divided geographies and cultures of *Jindabyne*, "genocidal displacement" comes face to face with the "irreconciled relation" to land "that refuses to remain half-seen [...] a measure of non-indigenous failure to move from being on the land to being in country" (Ryan 52), evidenced by water harvesting in the Snowy Mountains Scheme, and the more recent crises in water and land management.

## Aftermath Country

Haunted by historical, cultural and environmental change, *Jindabyne* constitutes a post-traumatic screen space. In aftermath culture, bodies and landscapes offer the "traces" (Gibson, *Transformations*) of "the social consequences" of a "heritage of catastrophe" that people "suffer, witness, or even perpetrate" so that "the legacy of trauma is bequeathed" (Walker i). The youth of *Jindabyne* are charged with traumatic heritage. The young Susan's body predictably bears the semiotic weight of colonial atrocity and non-indigenous environmental development. Evidence of witnesses, perpetrators and sufferers is still being revealed after the corpse is taken to the town morgue, where Claire (in a culturally improper viewing) is horrified by Susan's marks from being secured in the water by Stuart and the other men.

Other young characters are likewise haunted by a past that is environmental and tragically personal. Claire and Stuart's young son, Tom (left by his mother for a period in early infancy and the witness of his parents strained marital relations), has an intense fear of drowning. This personal/historical fear is played with by his seven year old friend, Caylin-Calandria, who expresses her own grief from the death of her young mother environmentally - by escaping into the surrounding nature at night, by dabbling in the dark arts and sacrificing small animals. The two characters "have a lot to believe in and a lot of things to express - belief in zombies and ghosts, ritual death, drowning" (Cordaiy 42). As Boris Trbic (64) observes of the film's characters, "communal and familial harmony is closely related to their intense perceptions of the natural world and their often distorted understanding of the ways their partners, friends and children cope with the grieving process."

Hence the legacy of trauma in *Jindabyne* is not limited to the young but pervades a community that must deal with unresolved ecologies no longer concealed by watery artifice. Backfilling works through unsettled aspects of country by moving, however unsteadily, toward healing and reconciliation. Within the aftermath of colonialism, 9/11 and the final

years of the Howard era, *Jindabyne* uses race and place to foreground the “fallout” of an indigenous “condemnation to invisibility” and the “long years of neglect by the state” (Ryan 52). Claire’s unrelenting need to apologise to the indigenous family and Stuart’s final admission of impropriety are key gestures in the film’s “microcosm of reconciliation” (53), when “the notion of reconciliation, if it had occupied any substantial space in the public imagination, was largely gone” (Rundell 44). Likewise, the invisibility of Aboriginal significance has specificity in the Jindabyne area – indigeneity is absent from narratives recounting the Snowy Mountains Scheme which “recruited some 60,000 Europeans,” providing “a basis for Australia’s postwar multicultural society” (Lennon 15); both ‘schemes’ evidencing some of the “unrecognised implications” of colonialism for indigenous people (Curthoys 36).

The fading of Aboriginal issues from public view and political discourse in the Howard era was serviced by the then governmental focus on “practical reconciliation” (Rundell 44), and post 9/11 by “the broad brushstrokes of western coalition and domestic political compliance” (Lambert, *CMC* 252), with its renewed focus on border control, and increased suspicion of non-Western, non-Anglo-European difference. Aftermath culture grapples with the country’s complicated multicultural and globalised self-understanding in and beyond Howard’s Australia and *Jindabyne* is one of a series of texts, along with “refugee plays” and Australian 9/11 novels, “that mobilised themselves against the Howard government” (Rundell 43-44). Although the film may well be seen as a “profoundly embarrassing” display of left-liberal “emotional politics” (44-45), it is precisely these politics that foreground aftermath: local neglect and invisibility, terror without and within, suspect American leadership and shaky Australian-American relations, the return of history through marked bodies and landscapes. Aftermath country is simultaneously local and global – both the disappearance and the ‘problem’ of Aboriginality post-Mabo and post-9/11 are backfilled by the traces and fragments of a hidden country that rises to the surface.

## Conclusion

What can be made of this place now? What can we know about its piecemeal ecology, its choppy geomorphics and scarified townscapes? [...] What can we make of the documents that have been generated in response to this country? (Gibson, *Transformations*).

Amidst the apologies and potentialities of settler-indigenous recognition, the murdering electrician Gregory is left to roam the haunted alpine wilderness in *Jindabyne*. His allegorical presence in the landscape means there is work to be done before this badland can truly become something more. Gibson (*Badland* 178) suggests country gets “called bad [...] partly because the law needs the outlaw for reassuring citizens that the unruly and the unknown can be named and contained even if they cannot be annihilated.” In *Jindabyne* the movement from backtracking to backfilling (as a speculative and fragmental approach to the bodies and landscapes of aftermath culture) undermines the institutional framing of country that still seeks to conceal shared historical, environmental and global trauma. The haunting of *Jindabyne* country undoes the ‘official’ production of outlaw/negative space and its discursively good double by realising the complexity of resurfacing – electricity is everywhere and the land is “uncanny” not in the least because “the town of Jindabyne itself

is the living double of the drowned original" (Ryan 53). The imaginative backfill of *Jindabyne* reorients a confused, purgatorial Australia toward the "small light of home" (53) – the hope of one day being "in country," and as Gibson (*Badland* 3) suggests, the "remembering," that is "something good we can do in response to the bad in our lands."

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